

**CITY OF MINNEAPOLIS**  
**HERITAGE PRESERVATION COMMISSION STAFF REPORT**

---

FILE NAME: 706-08 South First Street  
DATE OF APPLICATION: December 26, 2002  
APPLICANT: Minnesota Historical Society  
DATE OF HEARING: January 14, 2003  
HPC SITE/DISTRICT: Washburn "A" Mill, St. Anthony Falls Historic District  
CATEGORY: contributing  
CLASSIFICATION: Certificate of Appropriateness  
STAFF INVESTIGATION AND REPORT: Greg Mathis  
DATE: January 6, 2003

---

**A. SITE DESCRIPTION & BACKGROUND:**

The Washburn "A" Mill sits on a site bounded by First and Second Streets South, Chicago Avenue, and the North Star Blanket Factory. The mill complex is both a National Historic Landmark (NHL) and a contributing property to the St. Anthony Falls Historic District. The NHL nomination states that the "Washburn A Mill Complex symbolizes the revolutionary technological and organizations innovations that the Washburn Crosby Company contributed to the American milling industry and, second, the birth and subsequent development of General Mills into the first truly national milling company." Cadwallader C. Washburn built the A Mill in 1874 and in 1878; it and the C Mill were destroyed by fire. When the two mills were rebuilt in 1879-80, they became the first automatic, all-roller, gradual reduction mills in the country. A fire gutted the A Mill in 1928; however, the interior was rebuilt and returned to operation. The mill finally closed in 1965. Since the C Mill no longer exists, the A Mill is the only surviving manifestation of C.C. Washburn's technological innovations.

In 1991, a major fire caused parts of the stone walls in the A Mill to collapse. In December 1996, the Heritage Preservation Commission (HPC) approved stabilization work that included debris removal, temporary wall stabilization, and removal of the unstable sections of the walls. In June 1997, the HPC approved additional stabilization work. In March 2001, the HPC approved the Minnesota Historical Society's request to the rehabilitation the A Mill for use as a museum and office building (upper floors).

The Washburn A Mill is comprised of several structures. The structures that are the subject of this application include the six-story Washburn A Mill, the six-story Wheat House, the silos, and the rail corridor behind the Humbolt Mill.

**B. PROPOSED CHANGES:**

The applicant is applying for a Certificate of Appropriateness to install signage for the museum. All of the signage, except Sign C.1, includes the Mill City Museum logo. The logo is red with the words "Mill City Museum" in capital letters and the words "Minnesota Historical Society" underneath in smaller letters. The applicant is seeking approval for the following signage:

- Sign A.1 – a painted wall sign applied to the Second Street façade of the Wheat House. The sign will feature the museum logo with the words “Mill City Museum” in 10’ and 6’ tall letters and “Minnesota Historical Society in 2’ tall letters. The applicant is proposing two alternatives. Alternative 1 is a 41’ tall by 31’ tall sign. Alternative 2 calls for a 47’ tall by 37’ wide sign that is similar to Alternative 1, except it has a white background and border. The applicant is proposing to install five projecting light fixtures to down light the sign. The type of fixtures are not specified in the application.
- Sign A.2 – two, 2’7” x 2’7” Mill City Museum logo signs etched into the glass doors on the museum’s Second Street entrance. The letter sizes on the sign will range from 1” to 5” tall.
- Sign A.3 – a 14’0” wide by 15’9” tall roof-top sign mounted on top of the new elevator structure located within the ruins of the mill building. The sign will have a white background surrounded by a gray frame. A single stroke white neon border will set behind the frame and illuminate the edges of the sign. The sign will feature a three-dimensional version of the museum logo surrounded by single stroke red neon. The lettering will range from 1’9” to 3’3” in height. The letters will be backlit lexan (plastic) letters that project out from the face of the logo. A single stroke of white neon will outline the “T” in the word “Mill” on the logo.
- Signs A.4 and A.4.1 – 3’0” x 3’0” surface-applied panelized (wall mounted) metal signs. The signs will be attached to the building with metal pins mounted to the mortar joints on the building. The signs will be painted gray, with the museum logo in red. The letters will range from 1½” to 6” in height. Sign A.4 will be mounted next to an entrance on the north façade of the A Mill. Sign A.4.1 will be mounted next to the Wheat House entrance.
- Signs B.1 – four, 3’0” x 3’0” metal blade (projecting) signs under the canopy paralleling Second Street. The signs will be painted gray with the museum logo in red. The height of the lettering on the signs will range from 2½” to 4½” in height.
- Sign C.1 – a 22’5” long backlit individual channel letter sign that reads “Mill City Museum” in 2’0” tall and 1’0” deep letters. The sign will be located on top of the canopy over the main entrance on Second Street. As proposed, the sign will have red, backlit plastic panels set into individual metal letters painted red.
- Sign D.1 – a 4’0” wide by 5’0” tall vertical projecting sign mounted on a column supporting the canopy over the “rail corridor” entrance on Chicago Avenue. The sign will have a white background and a gray frame. The sign will feature three-dimensional version of the museum logo surrounded by single stroke red neon. The lettering will range from 2” to 9” in height. The letters on the logo will be backlit lexan letters that project out from the face of the logo. A single stroke of white neon will outline the “T” in the word “Mill” on the logo.

## **C. GUIDELINE CITATIONS:**

***ST. ANTHONY FALLS HISTORIC DISTRICT SIGN CRITERIA, 1976***

- 1.0 Sign elements shall be compatible to the historic district, to the building (if on premise) and to the surroundings.
- 1.1 Sign dimensions shall be large enough to be visible to normal street traffic, but small enough to allow the building's basic design to be visible.
- 1.2 Paving setback of sign from the street or sidewalk shall be such to allow visual connection of sign to building and to allow a minimum of disruption of the view of the building's design.
- 1.3 The type of sign shall compliment the structure enhancing the building's design and materials.
- 1.4 The surface design such as the identification symbol (logo), the lettering and related patterns or pictures shall be harmonious with the related structure's age and design.
- 2.0 Signs shall not block or alter views of vistas important to the historic district's character, such as the Mississippi River, the steeple of Our Lady of Lourdes church or the Stone Arch Bridge.
- 3.0 Signs shall be safe, legible and non-obstructive.
- 3.1 They shall not be a nuisance to persons using the public right-of-way, or to adjoining properties, by virtue of their size, placement, height or brightness.
- 3.2 They shall convey messages and information to the public in an effective manner.
- 3.3 The proposed sign shall not obstruct fire-fighting police surveillance nor, be a traffic hazard by confusing or distracting motorists.
- 3.4 The sign shall be constructed of materials that will not create a nuisance due to decay, collapse, abandonment, fire or collision.

## ***GUIDELINES FOR SIGNS & SIGNAGE FOR HISTORIC PROPERTIES & DISTRICTS, 1993***

### **INTENT OF GUIDELINES**

These guidelines outline sign usage for historic districts and properties. Signs play an important role in maintaining the quality of properties and districts. Installations and designs that are not sensitive to the architecture and history jeopardize the character of the buildings, neighborhoods, and districts. Signs create a framework that enhances the worth and potential of the historic properties and districts. Signs should be designed and installed with sensitivity to historical design and manufacturing methods. Artistic signs and murals should be compatible with the visual and historical context of the building or district. The HPC reviews each sign on a case-by-case basis and reserves the right to deviate from any specific guideline if it determines that an application of the guidelines would adversely affect a historic property. All signage within a historic district or for an individually designated site must be reviewed by the HPC.

### **GENERAL GUIDELINES**

#### **Signage:**

- a. Maintenance or restoration of existing historical signs is encouraged in lieu of sign replacement. Signage shall promote the building, name and/or address, or a business, company or product associated with the building. Signage for a business that is not associated with or located within the buildings is not acceptable.
- b. The number of signs allowed shall be limited to one (1) per primary facade. The primary facade shall be the elevation of the building located adjacent to the street. Corner lots may have a sign located on each primary facade. All signage shall be located such that it does not obscure the architectural features of the buildings.

### **Multi-tenant Signage:**

- a. In the case of multi-tenant buildings, tenant signage may be considered on a case-by-case basis when the architecture of the building lends itself to an appropriate and consistent location for multiple signage.
- b. Approval of this type of signage requires a comprehensive signage plan submitted by the building owner.
- c. The building name and/or address shall be included on the primary building sign. Tenant signs shall be consistent with the type, height, and location.

### **Signage Colors:**

- a. Sign colors shall be compatible with colors of the building and its surroundings. No bright, day-glow or fluorescent colors shall be allowed.
- b. Sign colors shall be limited to four (4) per sign with at least three (3) being of the same hue, saturation, or brightness.

### **Installation:**

- a. Signage is usually of a temporary nature. Thus, signage installation must have a minimal impact on the building and must allow the building to return to its original condition upon signage removal.

### **Sign Types Allowed:**

- |                                      |  |
|--------------------------------------|--|
| • Painted signs                      | • Monumental signs                       |
| • Surface-applied individual letters | • Awning signage                         |
| • Surface-applied panelized          | • Innovative artistic signs              |
| • Horizontal projecting signs        | • Neon signs (behind storefront windows) |
| • Vertical projecting signs          | • Glass-applied signs                    |
| • Banners                            |  |

### **Sign Types Not Allowed:**

- |  |  |
|--|--|
| • Billboards, except in surface parking lots as permitted above.             | • Vacuum-formed or extended plastic lettering                              |
| • Roof-top signage, unless it was present during the period of significance. | • Murals on primary facades  |
| • Backlit awning signage   | • Three-dimensional hanging signs (unless interpreted as an artistic sign) |
| • Plastic-faced backlit signs  | • Animated signs (unless interpreted as an artistic sign)                  |

### **GUIDELINES FOR SPECIFIC SIGN TYPES**

### **Painted Signs or Murals:**

A painted sign is painted directly onto the surface of buildings.

- a. Size: the size of the sign or letter size is unrestricted.
- b. Material: the sign material shall be a weatherable exterior paint suitable for masonry.
- c. Location: painted signs are allowed only on non-primary facades unless supported by historic or physical documentation.
- d. Preparation: maintenance or restoration rather than replacement of existing painted signs is encouraged.
- e. Content: painted signs and/or murals are reviewed by the commission on a case-by-case basis for their artistic quality, intent, and impact on the features of the building's architecture.

### **Surface-applied Individual Letters:**

A surface-applied letter sign has individually-formed letters attached to the wall surface of the building.

- a. Size: letter size shall not exceed twelve (12) inches. The length is determined by the sign text and its relationship to the architectural features.
- b. Materials: suitable sign materials are metal, painted wood, and solid plastic with opaque matte finishes. Vacuum-formed plastic materials are not permitted.

### **Surface-applied Panelized:**

A panelized sign is constructed of a single piece, or a connected series of sign materials applied to the wall surface of the building.

- a. Size: panelized signs are limited to four feet, zero inches (4'-0") in height and twenty feet, zero inches (20'-0") in length. The letter height is limited to the panel height. Architectural features may also limit the panel size so that these features are not concealed.
- b. Materials: suitable sign materials are metal, wood, matte-finish plastics. Vacuum-formed plastic and backlit signs are not accepted.
- c. Placement: panelized signs shall be (appropriately) centered relative to architectural features. These features may not be concealed.

### **Horizontal Projecting Sign:**

A horizontal projecting sign has a horizontal orientation projecting from the surface of the wall.

- a. Size: a projecting sign is limited to four feet, zero inches (4'-0") in height up to six feet, three inches (6'-3") in length. A maximum size of twenty-five (25) square feet is allowed. The maximum thickness (projecture) of the sign is one foot, three inches (1'-3"). An allowance of four (4) inches may be added if electric bulbs are to be included. The letter height may be up to two feet, six inches (2'-6").

- b. Materials: projecting signs may be constructed of fabricated metal, incandescent bulbs, surface-mounted neon, channelized letters with neon. Backlit plastic or animated signs are not permitted.
- c. Placement: projecting signs shall not conceal architectural features or obstruct windows. They shall be located between the first and second floor.

### **Vertical Projecting Signs:**

A vertical projecting sign has a vertical orientation that projects from the surface of the building.

- a. Size: vertical projecting signs have a recommended height of eight feet, zero inches (8'-0"). However, additional height may be allowed after review by the Commission. The width is limited to two feet, six inches (2'-6"). Projecting logos may be up to five feet, zero inches (5'-0") in width. The maximum size shall not exceed twenty-five (25) square feet. The sign thickness shall not exceed one foot, three inches (1'-3"). An allowance of four (4) inches may be added if electric bulbs are used. Letter height is unrestricted.
- b. Materials: permitted materials include metal fabricated signs, incandescent bulbs, surface-mounted neon, neon in channelized letters. Backlit plastic and animated signs are not permitted. Matrix animated signs are only allowed in certain areas (see matrix).
- c. Placement: signage shall not obstruct architectural features or windows.

### **D. FINDINGS:**

1. The Washburn A Mill Complex is both a National Historic Landmark and a contributing property to the St. Anthony Falls Historic District.
2. The sign guidelines state "the number of signs allowed shall be limited to one per primary façade." Because the A Mill and Wheat House read as two structures, two signs are allowable on Second Street.
3. The number of signs proposed for the Second Street (south) and West River Parkway (north) facades exceed the number allowed by the sign guidelines. Additionally, the combination of two door signs (A.2), four hanging signs (B.1), and one large individual channel letter sign relatively short span of the A Mill façade would create a visual clutter that is not compatible with the historic character of the building and West Bank Milling subarea of the historic district.
4. Historically, the building had a large sign facing downtown, so a large sign on the Second Street façade of the complex is acceptable and the size of Sign A.1 complies with size requirements for painted walls signs.
5. No documentation has been presented to show that a painted wall sign was located on the façade of the Wheat House during the period of significance for the district. Consequently, Sign A.1 does not comply with the guideline that states "painted signs are allowed only on non-primary facades unless supported by historic or physical documentation"
6. The content guideline for painted wall signs states "painted signs... are reviewed by the commission on a case-by-case basis for their artistic quality, intent, and impact on the features of the building's architecture." Historic painted wall signs in the district typically have lettering or logos painted on backgrounds with

borders. Compared to Alternative 1, Alternative 2 for Sign A.2 comes closer fitting with the character of the complex and painted wall signs in the district.

7. No documentation has been presented to show that river-facing rooftop sign was located on the A Mill during the period of significance for the district. Consequently, Sign A.3 does not comply with the guideline that states rooftop signage is not allowed, unless it was present during the period of significance for the district.
8. Sign A.4 complies with all of the guidelines for surface-applied panelized signs.
9. Sign A.4.1 does not comply with the sign guidelines because it is the second sign on a primary elevation and it advertises the museum, which is not publicly accessible from its entrance.
10. While the 2'0" tall lettering proposed for the individual channel letter sign (Sign C.1) exceeds the 1'0" tall letter size allowed by the guidelines for surface-applied individual letters, the lettering size is acceptable because it is compatible with the scale of the building.
11. The plastic faces for the letters on the individual channel letter sign (Sign C.1) do not comply with the guideline that states plastic faced backlit signs are not an allowed sign type.
12. Except for width, Sign D.1 complies with all of the guidelines for vertical projecting signs. While the width of the sign is wider than what is allowed by the design guidelines, the width is acceptable because the size of the sign is compatible with the scale of the building.
13. The reflective paint proposed for several of the signs does not comply with the guideline that states "no bright, day-glow, or fluorescent colors are allowed."

#### **F. STAFF RECOMMENDATION:**

Staff recommends that the HPC adopt staff findings, deny a Certificate of Appropriateness for signs A.3, A.4.1, and B.1 and approve a Certificate of Appropriateness for the signs A.1, A.2, A.4, C.1, and D.1, subject to the following conditions and changes:

1. Alternative 2 (with background) is the approved version of A.1 and a border must be added to the sign.
2. The light fixtures for the painted wall sign (Sign A.1) must be approved by the HPC staff.
3. The plastic faces proposed for Sign C.1 are not approved. The letters must have a single stroke of exposed neon in each letter.
4. The proposed reflective sign paint is not approved. All reflective paint must be changed to non-reflective paint.